

A Better Conspiracy Theory Than Oliver Stone's

By JONATHAN KWITNY

What distresses me about Oliver Stone's new movie "JFK" is not that I think it will persuade the country of Mr. Stone's thesis, that the rest of the government killed Kennedy. Rather, I think the movie, with its many distortions, will reinforce the more widely held view—already expressed in early criticism of the film—that the assassination is a morass, not understood and maybe not understandable. This thesis, while less noxious than Mr. Stone's, also ignores the evidence.

Because of the intellectual dishonesty in the work of early Warren Commission critics like Jim Garrison, the hero of the film and author of a book on which it is based, I tended for years to accept the commission's "lone nut" theory. While flawed, it was the most satisfying around. Then, in 1978, some lawmen I had long respected, who had joined the staff of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, invited me to Washington. In a day, they laid out previously unassembled evidence that changed my mind.

Amid much corroborative detail, the key fact was this: In the months before the assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby—the two men everyone agrees committed crimes that week-end—were both working with intimates of Carlos Marcello, the Mafia boss of the South. And Marcello, an experienced murder-plotter, had the strongest motive for murdering President Kennedy: The president's death saved Marcello and his empire from ruin; probably nothing else could have.

Now, that alone doesn't prove anybody killed anybody (although with additional evidence it makes a helluva case). But it does prove, at least to me, that anyone honestly seeking truth about the assassination has to go over the Marcello mountain before taking the road further.

You can't write it out of your script as Messrs. Garrison and Stone—and some of their critics—have done. The movie dwells

on two men Oswald worked with in 1963, Guy Banister and David Ferrie, who are depicted as intelligence agents arming Cubans for a new Bay-of-Pigs-type invasion called Operation Mongoose, which we're told Kennedy canceled. Not so.

What Messrs. Banister and Ferrie, private investigators, were mainly doing in those months was helping Marcello defend a second deportation proceeding the Kennedys brought against him, to be tried—maybe not so coincidentally—Nov. 22. Mr. Ferrie was Marcello's private pilot, meeting with him often. Messrs. Ferrie, Banister and Marcello all hated Fidel Castro and actively encouraged his Cuban opposition. But considering that the stakes were Marcello's vast gambling, dope and kick-back empire (Ruby helped run the Dallas end), and that Marcello was almost killed when the Kennedys forcibly deported him to the Guatemalan jungle in 1961, is it really likely that anti-communism is what moved this group to undertake something so dangerous as killing a president?

The film says former CIA director Richard Helms testified that Ferrie's friend Clay Shaw "worked for" the CIA; in fact, Mr. Helms said only that Mr. Shaw, like many businessmen traveling abroad, sometimes told inquiring agents in the U.S. what he'd seen.

Consider also that on Nov. 22—as Marcello went to trial, Mr. Ferrie went mysteriously to Texas and Kennedy went to his death—CIA officer Desmond Fitzgerald, calling himself "the personal representative of Robert Kennedy," delivered yet another weapon (a booby-trapped pen) to yet another Cuban exile to try to kill Castro.

Messrs. Garrison and Stone would have you believe the Kennedys had suddenly turned into flower children, bent on breaking up the CIA and embracing Khrushchev, and that this was the motivation for the assassination. But just weeks before the murder, President Kennedy had staged a coup installing a military government in

Vietnam. "JFK" makes the coup sound like a surprise to Kennedy. Kennedy's foreign policy team, and brother Robert, continued to support the war for years. Operation Mongoose was never an invasion plot, but a campaign of sabotage against Castro nurtured by the Kennedys.

Messrs. Garrison and Stone bring up Marcello only to accuse the assassination conspirators of trying to stop Mr. Garrison with public smears linking him to Marcello. Mr. Garrison says in his 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," that in 12 years as New Orleans district attorney he never met Marcello (not something I'd think a DA would want to boast of).

What the movie doesn't say is that the corruption charges against Mr. Garrison were largely compiled by Walter Sheridan, then with NBC News. Mr. Sheridan had been the Kennedys' chief aid on rackets investigations since the 1950s and was so close to the family he took a job with Teddy after Bobby died. Mr. Sheridan obviously wasn't on the assassination team. Marcello, on the other hand, was a comrade in crime of Kennedy nemesis Jimmy Hoffa, and Mr. Sheridan exposed that, which is what led him to Mr. Garrison.

Yes, a lot remains unanswered about the assassination: How many guns were there? (It's unlikely Oswald fired alone, but not impossible.) Why did Mr. Ferrie go to Texas? (To fly some killers out? To help kill Oswald?) Was Oswald supposed to have been killed earlier, and was the job botched? (I suspect so.)

But the basics were becoming clear. This movie, supposedly about truth, has sadly muddled the waters.

Wall Street

Mr. Kwitny, a former *Journal* reporter, wrote and presented a PBS documentary on the Kennedy assassination. A review of "JFK" appears on the *Leisure & Arts* page today.

Most of this is untrue